

Managing the ‘popular girl’ and ‘challenges at home’ discourses at secondary school: the perspectives of 12-14 year old girls, predominantly from lower-income White British families

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Managing the ‘popular girl’ and ‘challenges at home’ discourses at secondary school: the perspectives of 12-14 year old girls, predominantly from lower-income White British families

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This article explores the perspectives of 23 girls in their second and third years (12–14 years) at four English secondary schools. Having tracked the girls since their final year of primary school (10–11 years), the article explores how they continue to negotiate powerful discourses in their lives. It uses a Foucauldian framework (1979) to explore the potential for a ‘plurality of resistances’, initially focusing on how girls reached a ‘compromise’ with the dominant ‘popular’ girl discourse through the adoption of what was described as a ‘middle person’ discourse, as well as examples where a ‘compromise’ was not achieved. The article continues by exploring a sub-sample of 12 girls – predominantly from lower income White British families – who were negotiating the ‘popular girl’ discourse with an additional intersecting ‘challenges at home’ discourse. It explores where Foucauldian part-‘resistance’ and ‘compromise’ was possible for the girls, and where it was not. This article is significant in that it focuses on the intersection of powerful discourses from the perspectives of some of the most vulnerable members of our school communities. In recognising the girls’ challenging positions, the article identifies practical strategies for supporting this group more widely in school.

Key words: girls; discourse; popular; challenges at home; power; resistance

Introduction

In this article, I explore girls’ management of powerful discourse at secondary school¹, with a particular focus on girls aged 12–14 years, who are negotiating dominant ‘popular’ discourses with equally dominant ‘challenges at home’, including adult substance abuse; mental health issues; disability; absent/unreliable parents; and poverty. This article recognises that research has tended to focus on discourse negotiation in relation to more visible and powerful groups in our school settings (Paechter and Clark 2016). It seeks to address this balance by exploring the perspectives of girls predominantly from lower-income families.

We already know that adolescent girls, generally, are under pressure to conform to normative models of femininity if they want to be ‘popular’ or at least avoid being unpopular in secondary school (Jackson 2006). Paechter (2010) informs us that femininities can be constructed and performed in practices which include ways of being, and there is an established relationship

between popularity and hyperfemininity, with its inherent association with heterosexuality (Francis, 2010). Femininities can also encapsulate attitudes and behaviour (Paechter 2010), with evidence that ‘popular’ girls have the power to squash people; are not well liked (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007); and are not necessarily ‘nice’ (Duncan 2004). Similar to their male counterparts, Jackson (2006) reminds us that ‘popular’ girls display an air of indifference towards academic work, and identifies the literature which indicates that girls who deviate from ‘normative versions’ of femininity - which are premised on heterosexuality - are Othered (e.g. Hey 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Paechter 1998; Kehily 2001; Renold 2005).

Although girls are located in this discursive ‘popular’ frame, Youdell (2006) would suggest that they are not fully determined by such frames, arguing that the subjectivated subject has been shown to retain a significant degree of agency. This, perhaps, is evident in Jackson’s (2006, 80) description of ‘balancers’, who attempt to negotiate both the ‘uncool to work’ and ‘academic credentials’ discourses at play. Similarly, Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman (2002, 201) discuss a ‘middle way’, where schoolwork is completed, although not ‘single-mindedly’ – therefore avoiding the label of ‘over-studious’. There is evidence of pupils being open and even drawing attention to their high achievement, whilst also retaining popularity with peers (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2012). This, however, still relies upon normative monological productions of ‘girling’; the good fortune of being physically attractive; and sociability (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2012).

Paechter and Clark’s (2016) recent study does, however, provide examples of girls who have eschewed ‘cool’ discourses and subsequently enjoy greater physical freedom, as well as fewer constraints on their behaviour. Such examples encourage us to avoid viewing non-dominant femininities as subordinate or marginal, but rather as ‘alternative’ or, indeed, ‘partially resistant identities’ (Paechter and Clark 2016, 458). This has yet to be explored in relation to girls who are managing equally powerful home and school discourses, and, therefore, will be prioritised here.

The article has five further sections: Section 2 contains the literature review, as well as the theoretical framework used; Section 3 outlines the methodology, providing information on participants, data collection methods, ethical considerations and the analysis of data; Section 4 presents the findings, followed by a discussion of identified themes in Section 5; and a conclusion in Section 6.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The literature review begins by further exploring the evidence presented in Section 1 which suggests that popularity for adolescent girls is closely associated with models of normative femininity (Jackson 2006), and recognises that heterosexuality and femininity are intrinsically linked (George 2007). It continues by exploring these normative femininities in relation to high achievement, class, complex home lives and – briefly – race. It concludes by outlining the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

Examples of normative femininities in the literature include the ‘girly-girl’, defined as hyper-feminine and passive, with a focus on her appearance as a leisure activity (Holland and Harpin 2015); and the hyper-feminine girl, who is ‘evocative of (hetero) sexualised femininity and investments/production of the object of the masculine gaze’ (Francis et al. 2017, 1098). Elsewhere, the ‘cool girl’ discourse is discussed: a girl who is constantly aware of her own appearance and its conformity to mutual ideals; and who spends a great deal of time upholding her status (Paechter and Clark 2010), looking perfect and gaining boys’ attention, even if she is not liked (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007).

The policing of these ‘popular’ femininities is evident in the literature (such as Epstein, O’Flynn, and Telford 2003; Paechter and Clark 2010), with Jackson and Vares (2015, 358) reminding us that ‘...perfect skin and pretty, skinny bodies present limited possibilities for girls “becoming”...’ Indeed, adolescent girls are coerced into putting aside their ‘authentic selves’, and become ‘female impersonators’ (Pipher 1994, 27), losing their assertive, energetic and ‘tomboyish’ personalities, and becoming more deferential (Pipher 1994). This limiting element is discussed more widely: the need for girls to be bland (Warrington and Younger 2011) and to act like everyone else to ‘fit in’ (Read, Francis, and Skelton 2011).

As also discussed in the introduction, there is evidence that academic success has to be mediated through normative femininity (Renold and Allan 2006; Francis, Skelton, and Read 2012), where girls’ maintenance of ‘clever’ identities at the cost of ‘doing girl’ and performing ‘girly’ femininities opens them up to social ostracism and bullying (Archer et al. 2012, 981). Science, in particular, is constructed as a masculine epistemology, which is excluding of the feminine and, therefore, excluding of girls who are expected to engage in femininity (Francis et al. 2017).

Managing achievement alongside ‘doing girl’ has been found to be challenging for both middle-class and working-class academically successful girls (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2012). This said, there is evidence that it can be more problematic for working-class girls who, as a group, may engage in more ‘glamorous’ performances of working-class femininity (see Archer et al. 2012), have fewer resources to meet such demands (Jackson 2010) and, therefore, can find it difficult to afford the trappings of the ‘girly girl’ (Holland and Harpin 2015). It can also be challenging for working-class girls to attain the valued forms of middle-class female ‘goodness’, which evidence suggests remains a desired yet refused subject position (Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007, 558). These examples are of particular significance to the case studies presented later in this article: girls who are generally coming from lower-income families. Therefore, the literature would suggest that they are often ‘doing girl’ amidst the powerful ‘popular’ discourse, whilst potentially under considerable social and/or economic pressure at home (Ridge 2005), with access to fewer resources, time and space (Jackson 2006), relative to their peers.

We also know that lower-income girls moderate their lives to accommodate their parents’ perceived needs and concerns, with evidence of self-denial; moderation of demands; and self-exclusion from social activities (Ridge 2005). This also needs to be considered within the

normative subject position of ‘girl’, as nice, good, nurturing and respectful (Bethune and Gonick 2017), where confrontation is viewed as ‘un-feminine’ (Ringrose and Renold 2010, 591), and within which there are few possibilities for doing conflict in sanctioned ways (Bethune and Gonick 2017). There is evidence that girls are conflicted, with examples of resistance, as well as accommodation, to dominant discourses of femininity – e.g. seeking role models which represent an ‘unfeminine’ desire for status and social power, whilst at the same time still desiring to emulate aspects of emphasised femininity (Read 2011). More specifically, how does this apply to girls conflicted and challenged further within their complex home lives? How do girls negotiate the ‘challenges at home’ discourse, which can demand a caring approach, with a ‘popular’ discourse, which encourages a flirty, hyper-/heterosexualised attitude at school within which the ‘uncool to work’ discourse dominates? Can this ‘lack of connection’ (Youdell 2006, 111) be reconciled and, if so, how?

Youdell (2006, 163) also discusses the privilege of middle-class Whiteness ‘..and its all but automatic equivalence with good student and ideal learner..’ Therefore, many of the lower-income girls presented here will also have to negotiate the identified dominant discourses whilst also potentially encircling an ‘excluded white-working-class hetero-(un) femininity’ (Youdell 2006, 111). Similarly, the girls from dual (Black British and White British) and Black British heritages in the study will need to negotiate dominant discourse, where the Black girl is traditionally stereotyped as ‘louder’ (Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007, 557), and where teachers spend a greater percentage of their time addressing social behaviours, and neglecting academic well-being (Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein 2012).

The next part of this section outlines the Foucauldian framework which has been used. A Foucauldian lense (1979, 101) was utilised to define and conceptualise discourse as an instrument of power. Foucault (1979, 101) does, however, also suggest that powerful discourse can provide opportunities for resistance. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the girls in Paechter and Clark (2016) study demonstrated some resistance to dominant ‘cool’ discourses. Foucault (1979) does not, however, suggest that resistance generally is ever in a position of exteriority in relation to power; neither does he suggest a ‘locus of great Refusal’ (Foucault 1979, 95–96). Instead, he suggests that there is a plurality of resistance: resistance which can be necessary, spontaneous, and/or quick to compromise (1979, 96). ‘Compromise’ – like ‘resistance’ – is interpreted as the acknowledgement of power, and the negotiation and management of this power, to avoid ‘standing out’, and here it is applied to ‘resistance’ within discourse. It was important that the research questions provided the potential to explore any ‘compromise’ and/or ‘resistance’ in relation to the girls.

Whilst I still had to be open to the possibility of radical ruptures or binary divisions (Foucault 1979, 96), I also had to be aware that ‘resistance’ is more likely to be mobile and transitional, spread over time and space at varying densities (Foucault 1979, 96). Therefore, an exploration of the girls’ perspectives longitudinally seemed important and relevant.

Foucault (1979, 101) also encourages us to be aware of the ‘complex and unstable process’ whereby discourse does not provide an opportunity for ‘resistance’, but can become a ‘stumbling block’ and, again, the research questions needed to be open to this possibility.

Therefore, the final research questions were:

- how do girls negotiate the dominating ‘popular’ discourse, when intersecting with the equally powerful ‘challenges at home’ discourse;
- are girls able to resist the power of these discourses, and acquire/retain agency?

Methodology

This longitudinal study initially started by tracking 34 girls in Year 6 (10–11 years) in their primary schools². Four primary schools in one English local authority (LA) were identified by an LA gate keeper. The schools served catchment areas which had larger numbers of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) [where the Government provides a healthy school meal to the most disadvantaged pupils (2018a)], relative to the LA as a whole. All Year 6 girls in the schools were invited to participate, and about 50% selected to do so (34 participants). 24 girls chose to continue with the project into Year 8 and 9 (12–14 years), across five secondary schools (four mainstream schools and one special school). The 24th girl in the study transferred to a special school and, as there was no evidence of a recognition/negotiation of ‘popular’ girl discourse at this stage of her school career, her data is not included within this article.

Parents/carers were asked to identify the ethnicity and FSM eligibility of their daughters on their informed consent forms. Although schools already collect information on these two areas, the consent forms were still returned in a sealed envelope, so that the girls were protected from any disclosure of FSM eligibility/ethnicity which their families/carers wished to remain confidential from the school. Of the 23 girls, 21 were White British, reflective of the areas where the schools were situated, although the sample did include two girls of Black British and dual (Black British and White British) heritage respectively (the heritage of these girls is not referred to individually in this article, to attempt to protect their identities). 10 girls identified as ‘Ever 6 FSM’³ (DfE 2012), including 9 girls who identified as White British ‘Ever 6 FSM’.

The ‘Ever 6 FSM’ figure was higher than the 21% entitled and 18% registered, nationally (Iniesta-Martinez and Evans 2012). This higher percentage might be due to the fact that the initial primary teachers made additional efforts to ensure all families were supported to participate. I was also informed by primary teachers that many more of the girls within the study came from families ‘just above the threshold for FSM’, although this could not be confirmed, as only FSM eligibility is formally collected by schools. Data indicated that just over half of the girls were working broadly ‘below the expected level’⁴ for their chronological

age (here, I have adopted the language used in schools). This increased to two thirds of the 'Ever 6 FSM' girls, who become central to the later discussion.

I worked broadly within the interpretivist tradition, researching the girls in their natural environment – their school. Detailed, individual semi-structured interviews were completed with all 24 girls in Year 8, and 21 of these girls in Year 9 (as three girls left the study at this stage). Open questions were constructed, allowing girls to respond individually to information on their 'learner', 'social' and 'physical' identity, as well as their home context, so that discourse, where relevant, had the potential to emerge. In addition to interview comments which suggested that a girl might be unsafe, and which were addressed according to the individual school's Child Protection policy, attention also had to be given to my response to the challenges which the girls discussed in interview. This included my response at the time, as well as in the coding of data.

Firstly, I had to ensure that my positionality, coming from a non-'challenges at home' background, did not encourage me to see the girls' presented 'difficulties' as more or, indeed, less significant than they actually were within individual girls' lives. I navigated this area by providing the girls with the space in interview to identify which challenges were significant, dominant and/or powerful for them, as well as those which were not, allowing for the fact that this could fluctuate over time and space (Foucault 1979). This also involved providing the girls with the space to identify and explore how they were potentially managing any challenges in their lives. This acknowledged that the discussion/inclusion of a challenge in interview – be it emphasised or fleeting – did not necessarily equate to its significance in a girl's life.

Whilst aware of the need to keep my body language, tone of voice and facial expressions in check during interviews (Fisher 2011), I also chose to explicitly acknowledge the girls' self-identified challenges by offering the support of a school contact, where they could discuss the issues further. This was taken up by many of the girls, and some girls discussed the additional support they had received through my intervention.

To contextualise the girls' perspectives, and to inform their interviews, accompanying classroom observations were undertaken. I adopted a 'minimally participating' role with scratch notes (Bryman 2012) and timings. The girls were becoming increasingly self-conscious in public, and so tended not to acknowledge me in front of their peers, but this observation role provided them with the option of approaching me in the classroom, if desired.

The girls eligible for 'Ever 6 FSM' were observed more closely in at least 6 randomly selected lessons across the two academic years, with the non-'Ever 6 FSM' girls observed in a minimum of 2 randomly selected lessons, due to the time limitations of this study. Therefore, it was acknowledged that observations were snap-shots of the girls' school lives, and that behaviour observed might not be typical. Observations were, therefore, supplemented, where available, with discussions with teachers at the time of observation, as well as school data, which included reports, quantitative attainment/progress data, and form tutor 'pupil profiles', both written and verbal.

BERA's (2011) Ethical Guidelines (current at the time of data collection) were adhered to, to ensure informed consent from participants (head teachers, teachers, parents and girls), which included discussing the right to withdraw; how data would be anonymised and confidentially stored; and how codes names/pseudonyms would be applied to the data. Attempts to minimise power relationships (e.g. Morrow 2005) were considered, and girls were provided with an information letter, to accompany their parents'/carers' consent form, so that they were more actively involved and also had a starting point for clarifying aspects of the project (Danby and Farrell 2005). I also encouraged the girls to identify particular lessons which they would not mind missing (Greene and Hill 2005) in order to be interviewed. I confirmed consent, again, when the girls arrived to meet me, and continued to rehearse 'opt out' methods with them, so that they understood their right to withdraw (Greig, Taylor, and Mackay 2007). This acknowledged that parental permission should not justify overriding a young person's opposition to participation (Darlington and Scott 2002).

The head teachers, teachers, parents and girls were aware from the consent form that if the girls shared something which I felt suggested that they were unsafe, I would be obliged to inform the school in line with Child Protection policy. There were several such examples in Years 8 and 9, as referred to earlier, and this information was immediately disclosed to the relevant teachers/schools. In all cases the girls consented for this information to be shared, as they were keen to receive support; however, I acknowledge that this might not have been the case. One also has to be aware that this need for a caveat to confidentiality within the research might have contributed to some girls/families selecting not to participate, withholding information, or withdrawing from the study. Whilst this cannot be avoided, it does reveal the challenges of reaching potentially vulnerable children in research. In addition, acknowledging that some of the girls' disclosures were both personal and sensitive, and that particular details might contribute to girls being identified in this article, some superficial changes to their circumstances have been made, or issues only discussed broadly, to protect them further.

Analysis of data

The process of analysis of data began with the identification of 'First Cycle' codes, influenced by Saldana (2013, 3–4) and Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, (2014). Interview questions had been designed to enable the girls to comment on their learner, social and physical identities, to support the identification of school discourse and – accompanied by observations in class – these became the initial descriptive codes. The girls also increasingly discussed their peers' identities in relation to these three areas and, therefore, the codes were broadened to acknowledge this.

The codes are explored in further detail in the Findings section, but are outlined below:

- Learner identity —→ *evaluation of self/self & peers/peers* —→ *continued change/change/compromised change/no change/no change with challenges.*

- Social identity —→ *evaluation of self/self & peers/peers* —→ *continued change/change/compromised change/no change/no change with challenges.*
- Physical identity —→ *evaluation of self/self & peers/peers* —→ *continued change/change/compromised change/no change/no change with challenges.*

The use of the term ‘change’, here, requires some explanation. It defined evidence of a shift to a hyper- (hetero-) femininity, coupled with an ‘uncool to work’ positioning. Therefore, ‘continued change’ recognised change already made in this area in Year 7; ‘compromised change’ identified Foucauldian (1979) part-‘resistance’ through ‘compromise’: small adapted changes in one or more identities, but not complete adherence; ‘no change’ represented girls who were unaltered from Year 7; and the addition of ‘challenges’ to this code represented girls who were subject to bullying/‘othering’, as a result of this unchanged identity.

These ‘First cycle’ codes (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) were then analysed further, revealing patterns across learner, social and physical identities. For example, the following pattern was evident and common across the sample:

- Learner identity —→ *evaluation of self* —→ *compromised change.*
- Social identity —→ *evaluation of self* —→ *no change.*
- Physical identity —→ *evaluation of self* —→ *compromised change.*

These consistent patterns led to the development of ‘Second cycle’ codes (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014), where three broad combinations of identities were highlighted. These combinations reflected three dominant school discourses at play, including ‘popular girl’, ‘middle person’ and ‘standing out’, and accompanying examples of Foucauldian (1979) ‘power’; part-‘resistance’ through ‘compromise’; and ‘stumbling blocks’ respectively. The coding allowed the girls to be tracked individually, as a sample/sub-sample (i.e. all girls entitled to FSM) and longitudinally. These discourses are defined and explored further in the Findings section.

A similar approach to coding was undertaken for the girls’ home contexts/perspectives. ‘First Cycle’ coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) revealed descriptive codes including, for example: absent/unreliable parents; poverty; parental substance abuse; caring responsibilities; as well as more supportive examples, including maternal emotional support and out-of-school activities.

An example of ‘First Cycle’ coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) is provided below.

*Absent/unreliable parenting —————> self-identified challenges/self-identified support
past/fluctuating/on-going.*

Subsequent ‘Second cycle’ coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) identified particular discourses at play, including ‘stable home life’, which identified a group of girls who were settled and content at home, as well as examples of the ‘challenges at home’ (Fisher 2017) and ‘personal challenges’ discourses, which identified difficulties which girls were facing outside-of-school, and are the focus of this article.

Again, the coding allowed the girls to be tracked individually, as a sample/sub-sample (e.g. all girls entitled to FSM) and longitudinally. Whilst some of the home challenges experienced by the girls were mobile and transitional (Foucault 1979), some, such as poverty, generally remained consistent, and there was also evidence of the impact of previous home/personal challenges furrowing across the girls and remolding them (Foucault 1979). Foucauldian (1979) ‘power’ (101); part-‘resistance’ (101) through ‘compromise’ (96); and ‘stumbling blocks’ (101) were also identified in these challenges and these will be explored further in the Discussion section.

Whilst pupil interviews were the dominant method used in fieldwork and analysis, data from observations and school staff (i.e. reports, quantitative attainment/progress data and form tutor ‘pupil profiles’, both written and verbal) provided an opportunity for coding and findings to be corroborated. The intention was not to deploy triangulation in a naïve sense, with methods meeting at a precise point, but rather to point towards a similar direction. In reality, the information gained from schools and observations closely matched that presented by the girls in interviews, although it was identified that some home challenges had not been shared with school staff.

‘Second cycle’ coded (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) from the home and school sections of the data were then compared. Foucault (1979) encourages us not to imagine a world of dominant and dominated discourse, but instead to consider a multiplicity of discursive elements at play in various strategies. Therefore, I did not try and predict which discourse was more dominant, but instead identified a Foucauldian (1979, 30) ‘interlocking’ of home and school discourse: a cluster of power relationships which were creating Foucauldian (1979, 101) ‘stumbling-blocks’, as well as opportunities for part-‘resistance’ through ‘compromise’ (96) for some of the girls.

Different combinations of home and school discourse were then explored, which led to particular patterns emerging and the identification of themes, four of which will be explored further in this article:

1. ‘standing out’ + ‘challenges at home’ = the ‘othered girl’;

2. 'middle person' + 'standing out' + 'challenges at home' = the 'othered girl';
3. 'middle person' + 'challenges at home' = the 'self-supporting' girl;
4. 'middle person' + 'challenges at home' = the 'passive girl';
5. 'popular girl' + challenges at home = the 'angry girl'.

In the following section, I return to the discourses which were identified during 'Second cycle' coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014), before exploring the above four themes in further detail in the Discussion.

Findings

'Popular girl'

'...[the popular people] they're the people in school that everyone knows. Everyone wants to be friends with; everyone talks to – like, they don't necessarily like them, but to be sort of cool, you have to fit in with the popular ones; and with girls it basically means being caked in make-up..if you have your skirt, like, really short; and then go round, like, flirting with everyone and not doing your work and, like, just talking back to the teachers and not turning up to lessons' (Amy, Year 9).

This example from the interview data illustrates how the girls in Year 8 and 9 were increasingly aware of the changing identities/positionings of both themselves and their peers, revealing initial descriptive codes:

- **learner identity** – i.e. not prioritising academic work or appearing not to engage with it in front of peers; being argumentative with teachers;
- **social identity** – i.e. flirting with the opposite sex/young male teachers; being seen to be 'cool' through taking up 'popular' designated space in the playground and spending time with those considered to be 'popular';
- **physical identity** – i.e. an obligatory short skirt, which can be viewed as '...a material agent through which the possibility of sexuality is made manifest through a wider 'apparatus' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 16); other uniform elements – mascara and long/loose hair – which also appeared to be similar examples of 'material agents' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015).

The three identified aspects of identity appeared to be intrinsically linked, with evidence that girls who 'took up' changes in one area also 'took up' changes in the other two areas. These changes in physical, social and learner identity also reflected – to varying degrees – the secondary/high school 'doing girl' discourses discussed earlier, particularly 'hyper-feminine' (Holland and Harpin 2015) and hetero-sexualised femininity (Francis et al. 2017). They, therefore, marked the identities out as reflecting hyper-feminine and heterosexualised interpretation of both gender and sexuality. The 'uncool to work' element of the data did not appear to be gender-specific – which would support the literature presented earlier – although this could not be confirmed, as boys were not included in the study.

‘Second cycle’ coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) highlighted patterns across the three identities, including evidence of describing and sometimes doing ‘popular girl’ discourse. In defining the discourse as such, I acknowledge that the term ‘popular’ has been used elsewhere, to describe similar positionings (e.g. Jackson 2006; Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2007).

Foucault (1979) reminds us that discourse ‘transmits and produces power’ (101), and there is also evidence of the power and influence of the ‘popular’ girl in the literature (e.g. Read 2011), as well as within this dataset. For example, in Year 9, Amy described the ‘popular girl’ discourse’s relationship to ‘fitting in’ amongst her peers; Leah contrasted ‘small people’ with those who were ‘popular’ – this was not discussed in relation to height or age, but appeared to be a description of power relationships, with Leah contrasting those with and without agency; Molly implicitly discussed the power of the accompanying ‘uncool to work’ discourse: ‘...there’s...some boy who gets tormented a lot for being really clever and using big words all the time...’

Acknowledging such power, Foucault (1979, 96) describes a ‘plurality’ of possible resistances of which ‘compromise’ features, and this was reflected in the positioning of many of the girls in the data set who, acknowledging the power of ‘popular’ discourse, part-‘resisted’ (101) through ‘compromise’ (96) to a level which they felt comfortable with. This will now be explored in further detail.

‘Middle person’ discourse

In interviews, the girls described the positioning of many of the girls in the study who, in the light of the dominating hyper-feminine and heterosexualised element of the identified ‘popular girl’ discourse, and in an attempt to avoid ‘standing out’, compromised on their physical identity – notably wearing hair long/loose and/or wearing mascara. Therefore, whilst part-‘resistance’ (Foucault 1979, 101) through ‘compromise’ (Foucault 1979, 96) towards the ‘popular girl’ discourse was evident, there were no ‘radical ruptures’ (Foucault 1979, 96) – just spontaneous and necessary changes to ‘fit in’. Although the hyper- (hetero-) femininity was ‘compromised’ (Foucault 1979, 96) – with the girls particularly dismissive of the ‘flirty’ aspect – it was not withdrawn, ensuring continued normative femininity, and a continued binary interpretation of gender.

Changes to the girls’ ‘learner identities’ were also evident. In class, the students’ academic engagement and involvement was part-demonstrated by the raising of their hand to answer questions. The data suggested that this had altered in Years 8 and 9, relative to primary school, with girls discussing how they no longer raised their hands:

‘...cos I’m very self-conscious that people might laugh’ (Emma, Year 8);

‘I think I lost some confidence...I’m still try to fit in to a group’ (Lucy, Year 9);

'Probably because everyone else is listening and just in case I get it wrong...' (Grace, Year 8).

This curbing of their outward-facing academic profile appeared to be in response to the dominant and powerful 'uncool to work' element of the 'popular girl' discourse – a discourse which many of the girls in this study did not want to (fully) engage with. Therefore, many of the girls, again, part-'resisted' (Foucault 1979, 101) through 'compromise' (Foucault 1979, 96), adjusting their learner identities to avoid attracting their popular peers' negative gaze, but still engaging with academic work. See also Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman's (2002, 201) 'middle way' and Jackson's (2006, 80) 'balancers' – as discussed earlier.

Whilst it has been noted that the 'uncool to work' discourse is prevalent across the two sexes, the girls' decision to compromise in this way also increasingly reflected the contemporary femininity discourses of politeness, passiveness and diligence (Youdell 2006) – and observations suggested that this allowed the boys to increasingly dominate.

Therefore, part-'resistance' (Foucault 1979, 101) through 'compromise' (Foucault 1979, 96) informed the 'First Cycle' coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) for physical and learner identities. 'Social identity', in contrast, was an area which appeared to reveal less 'compromise' and arguably more explicit 'resistance' (Foucault 1979, 101) to the 'popular girl' discourse, with many of the girls rejecting 'popularity' in favour of like-minded friends – for example:

'...[a] load of the other girls, when they came up [to secondary school], they, like, changed; and I was, like – well I don't care. I'd rather, like, not have loads of friends than having to change my whole personality and everything...they went from wearing a little bit of make-up to a lot of make-up' (Amber, Year 8 interview).

'I'm not really popular, but I'm popular within my crowd; within my group of people' (Molly, Year 8 interview).

Therefore, many of the girls' refusal to make concessions regarding their friendships meant that a compromised position was less visible within their social identity. This said, it could be argued that their compromised 'learner' and 'physical' identities actually attracted them to like-minded similarly 'compromising' friends, beyond the boundaries of the 'popular girl' discourse, even if sub-consciously. Or perhaps their seeming lack of compromise on friendship simply demonstrated their acceptance of their 'non-popular girl' friendship position – an acknowledgement of their exclusion from the social element of the 'popular girl' discourse.

The girls' learner and physical identities, which reflected Foucauldian (1979) part- 'resistance' (101) through 'compromise' (96) combined with a general desire to maintain comfortable friendship groups was identified as a pattern across the data. It provided evidence of a 'middle person', which had been defined as such by Emily – one of the girls in the study. A further discourse was, therefore, identified: a 'middle person' discourse ('Second Cycle' code [Saldana

2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014]). This discourse, although defined by a girl in the study, acknowledges Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman's (2002, 201) use of a 'middle way'.

'Standing out' (Crosnoe 2011)

Yet despite evidence that the majority of the girls in the study utilised the 'middle person' discourse to varying degrees, to avoid their 'popular' peers' negative gaze, some girls still 'stood out'. 'Second Cycle' coding (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) had identified a pattern, where many girls who had not changed in response to the 'popular girl' discourse were bullied or 'othered', revealing a 'standing out' discourse. Yet further interrogation revealed a further pattern, where some girls who had part-'resisted' (Foucault 1979, 101) through 'compromise' (Foucault 1979, 96) in their learner or physical identities, or who had made attempts to embrace the hyper-femininity discourse – particularly in terms of their physical identity, were still 'othered'.

Further pattern coding revealed that these girls often had additional attributes which were not viewed as compatible with the 'popular girl' discourse, with its emphasis on hyper- and hetero-femininity, together with an 'uncool to work' approach. For example, having a disability/health issues; not identifying as heterosexual; or having a low-maintenance appearance. These attributes led to the girls being excluded from 'popular girl' discourse and being 'othered' – either temporarily or permanently.

The identification of the 'non-popular girl attributes' emphasised that part-'resistance' (Foucault 1979, 101) through 'compromise' (Foucault 1979, 96) was not always successful, and certain attributes appeared to override attempts to negotiate a 'middle person' discourse. Similarly, 'non-popular girl' attributes overrode any attempt to embrace the 'popular girl' discourse.

It was also found that the 'standing out' discourse coincided with significant personal or home difficulties in the girls' lives, which had been 'Second cycle' coded (Saldana 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014) as evidence of a 'challenges at home' discourse and/or a 'personal challenges' discourse. Examples included evidence of absent/unreliable or strained relationships with parents – for example:

'I don't like home at the moment. My step-dad has just come out of prison and all they do is row and my mum takes it out on me all the time. She's always yelling at me for stuff I haven't done...At one point, I couldn't handle the stress and I ran away. I can't stand home. I don't feel safe' (Nicole, Year 8).

There was also evidence of disability/health needs – the girl herself, siblings or parents – for example: 'My [sibling]... is going to die as a teenager' (Georgia, Year 8), as well as evidence of adult substance dependency; mental health difficulties; and poverty:

'[Our house] it's too cramped. We need to find somewhere new. It's mouldy, and I have asthma...I don't have a laptop at home...I don't have a desk' (Lucy, Year 8).

This identified evidence of the interlocking of school and home discourses, highly articulated within a cluster of power relations (Foucault 1979, 30), which created Foucauldian (1979, 101) ‘stumbling blocks’ for the girls. This was in contrast to other girls who successfully navigated a ‘middle person’ discourse with their ‘challenges at home’, and therefore part-‘resisted’ (Foucault 1979, 101) through ‘compromise’ (Foucault 1979, 96) and managed the discourse power. These examples of both ‘compromise’ and ‘stumbling blocks’ led to the identification of four themes, which were outlined in Section 2. The remaining sections of the article will focus on these themes: the ‘othered girl’; the ‘passive girl’; the ‘angry girl’ and the ‘self-supporting girl’.

12 case studies out of the dataset of 23 girls have been used to discuss and illustrate the four themes. 11 girls have been omitted from the discussion at this stage, as they had successfully negotiated a ‘middle person’ discourse compromise – to varying degrees – and personal/home challenges featured rarely – if at all – in their interviews.

Further information on the selected 12 case studies is provided in Table 1. It should be noted that some of the challenges faced by the girls are discussed broadly, to protect their identities. The 12 girls were not categorised or fixed within one particular theme – some girls’ data revealed that they fitted into more than one group.

Discussion

The ‘othered’ girl

The data identified that six of the case studies (Leah, Chloe, Lily, Amy, Lucy and Sophie) had particular personal attributes – either physical or identity characteristics - which were targeted negatively by peers. These are discussed broadly, to further protect the girls’ identities, and include, for example:

- physical characteristics, such as having a low maintenance appearance (Holland and Harpin 2015) relative to hyper-feminine or ‘middle person’ peers; or a disability/health need;
- identity characteristics, such as high academic achievement; not identifying as heterosexual; or strong religious beliefs.

Reference back to the literature discussed earlier, highlighted how these attributes were not seen as compatible with the powerful and dominant ‘popular girl’ discourse of heterosexuality, hyper-femininity and ‘uncool to work’, and they were coded as ‘non-popular girl’ attributes. It would appear that they were used to heighten the power and dominance of the ‘popular girl’ discourse, enabling the girls to be ‘othered’ and ‘abjected’:

‘...positioned as the object of contempt, hatred...that work to confirm that ‘we’, at any rate, are inside and accepted. ‘We’ need this kind of affirmation because our insecurity, social anxiety and the constant threats of ostracism and contempt whirl

around and between us, creating panic and the desire to control the processes of ostracism' (Søndergaard 2012, 369).

This 'othered' status was recognised by the girls, for example:

There's the 'populars' and then there's where I am [demonstrating with her hands to the opposite end of an invisible scale]. Nowhere near their side. I remember in primary school that everyone used to be friends. Moved up to here and then everyone just branched out and then, like, everyone's, like, being mean. They just pick on, like, who they think is...not up to their standard; or so I've been told' (Leah, Year 9).

Some girls tried to reduce their 'othering' and abjection by adjusting their identity to try to 'fit in' and negotiating the 'middle person' discourse – for example, Lily dyed her hair and wore make-up, as she felt it was '...important to look nice to get a boyfriend' (Year 8 interview); and Leah wore her hair down. Yet there was no evidence that these attempts made any observable difference to their 'standing out' positioning, and, therefore, their 'othering'. Other girls' experiences were more nuanced, identifying a cycle of trying to 'fit in', followed by part-'resistance'. Here, it was not clear whether the part-'resistance' was genuine/desired, or whether it was used to cover up their continued rejection from the 'popular girl' discourse – for example:

'...you kind of rethink what you're doing in school and you try to act a different way, to try and fit in more...And then it's also like . . . at the same time you don't wanna fit in: you just wanna stay away from them...It's just . . . mm, it's really hard. But these are things that you have to kind of, like, deal with cos it's everyday life really' (Amy, Year 9).

There was even evidence of 'popular' peers trying to compound girls' 'othered' and abjected status by taunting them with inaccurate 'non-popular girl' attributes. For example, as can be seen from the extract below, 'lesbian' and 'ginger ninger' appeared to be used to consolidate Lily's previously identified 'non-popular girl' attributes and, therefore, her 'othered' and abjected status. Indeed, identifying as a lesbian was the least popular attribute in another study (Duncan 2004).

'...they've been bullying me; bullying me again – saying that I'm, 'ginger ninger' and calling me a lesbian and everything like that...they swear at me and call me '[a derogatory name referring to Lily's physical characteristic which has been omitted to protect her identity]' (Lily, Year 9).

The extract also demonstrated the homophobia present in the schools, and placed girls who did not present as heterosexual in a particularly vulnerable position. It is acknowledged that the term 'lesbian' was only used by male students to taunt particular girls. This suggested the male policing of girls' heterosexual and hyper-feminine identities, and was a further example of how 'non-normative femininity' was not tolerated within the 'popular girl' discourse. Such male policing was also evident in the narrative of Amy, who was taunted with the term 'slut':

'...in Year 8, a group of boys came up to me and called me, like, a slut – stuff like that. I was in trousers and a jumper and I was, like, fully covered; and I was, like, "How can you call me this, when I'm, like, this?" I don't understand how this works, but it's just, like, you have to deal with it...[and it was] over my hair once – cos I wear it like this [points to her high ponytail] and not down...calling me a gorm, a nerd, geek – cos I've been doing well in lessons. I actually do the work...and it's just stuff like that' (Year 9).

The term 'slut' is usually reserved in schools for girls 'making too much of an impression' when negotiating the complex and high-stakes positions of sexual availability, desirability and popularity (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 20) – not a girl whose appearance was 'low maintenance' (Holland and Harpin 2015) relative to the hyperfemininity style evident amongst her year group. It appeared, therefore, that 'slut' was used to confuse and unsettle and, rather like the use of the word 'lesbian', to consolidate Amy's previously identified 'non-popular girl' attributes and reinforce her 'othering'. In doing so, these words not only emphasised the power of the 'popular girl' discourse, but male control.

Interestingly, Erin did not have an immediately identifiable 'non-popular girl' attribute. Yet data did identify her peripheral place in the classroom, which appeared to be reinforced further in the social spaces of school:

'Everything's changed – like, my friends. Sometimes...I try talking to 'em, but they just ignore me. So I walk with 'em, but they just don't talk to me' (Erin, Year 9).

Quietness have been identified as antithetical to popularity (Duncan 2004), with reticence acknowledged as a possible reason for 'othering' in research: '...being introverted, quiet or shy, lacking in confidence... frequently marked students as 'other' (Warrington and Younger 2011, 155–156) – and this could have been the case with Erin.

Nicole's position was even less clear: she was subjected to significant and relentless social media bullying, yet the data did not identify a reason as to why she attracted this 'othering'. Data exploration did, however, reveal that whilst the 'non-popular girl' attributes (or, in the case of Nicole, 'bullying/othering without an identifiable cause') were not exclusive to the girls who had identified 'challenges at home', their persistent impact on, and prominence in the girls' lives/interviews, relative to those without identifiable difficulties in their home/personal lives, was evident. Additionally, whilst some girls in the broader sample spoke of support – usually at home – in dealing with school issues, these girls did not generally acknowledge or identify any person/provision, and appeared to be floundering in the face of their struggles.

Foucault's 'interlocking' of discourse, 'highly articulated around a cluster of power relations' (1979, 30), appeared to be evident in the data, where the challenges of negotiating the 'popular girl' discourse and 'challenges at home' was acknowledged, for example:

'When I was going through the bullying and stuff, I was also going through stuff with family and stuff with friendship groups and then the... comments [in relation to her

identity characteristic]. I went through a phase of self-harm' (Sophie, Year 8 interview).

Whilst not all girls could explicitly identify the influence of this powerful (1979, 30) 'interlocking', other girls were able to articulate its impact on their thinking space, for example:

'Home does not feel like home...I don't want anything to get any worse, but I know something's gonna get worse...I used to hide upstairs all the time... All this, it does distract me... when I get worried about stuff, it does distract me of my learning, cos I don't think of anything [else]' (Nicole, Year 8 interview).

The influence of this 'clustering of power relations' (Foucault 1979, 30) was further supported by the fact that improvements in particular girls' 'challenges at home' coincided with the impact of 'non-popular girl' attributes appearing to have a reduced impact at school. For example, Sophie discussed how improved relationships in her immediate family meant that she felt more confident in the face of bullying. Therefore, it appeared that where the 'cluster of power relations' (Foucault 1979, 30) was reduced, there was evidence that the girls were more confident to challenge the 'othering'. Yet for those whose 'challenges at home' did not improve, there was evidence that the 'cluster of power relations' (Foucault 1979, 30) was compounded further by their 'non-popular girl' attributes, leading to self-doubt, low self-esteem and what appeared to be permanent 'othering'.

We know that Chloe, Lily and Leah's primary school teachers had previously identified the potential for the girls to be vulnerable at secondary school (see Fisher 2017). The teachers were not specific about the influences on this vulnerability, but they focused on the girls' social skills/relationships – for example: 'Leah will be lost at secondary school' (Fisher 2017, 913). As discussed in Fisher (2017), primary teachers felt that they were custodians of a considerable amount of information about the girls, which might influence their transitions. Yet they also spoke of not always having the opportunity to share this information, and/or being reluctant to, in case it jeopardised the girls' 'fresh start'. It is also important to note that no such explicit vulnerabilities were identified/shared by primary teachers with regard to Amy, Sophie, Lucy and Erin. It is worth considering, though, whether a more proactive approach to the 'non-popular girl' attributes would have been beneficial, and this will be returned to in the conclusion.

The passive girl

Earlier, I have discussed how the girls adjusted their learner identity to accommodate the 'uncool to work' discourse. For most girls, this 'middle person' compromise was limited to no longer raising their hands to answer questions. However, for Erin, Lily, Molly and Leah, there was also evidence in observations of restricted physical movement – staying still and silent – accompanied by a desire to avoid eye contact with the teacher or peers. Leah said:

'Um, I guess, like, I'm quite shy in my lessons cos, like, there are a lot of people around, like, who I don't usually know and most of them are, like, the popular

children. So...I'm just sitting there quietly, like, trying to not to, like, make a fool of myself...trying to do my work...'(Year 9).

Similarly, Molly commented:

'...I sit next to some of the popular people and...so...I never talk . . . I'm just, like, sitting there, quietly doing my work.I don't participate much because, erm, like, I don't want to make a fool of myself...loads of other people put their hands up to say really stupid things, but they're in a popular crowd, so they're allowed to do that. I feel, like, I'm not allowed when I'm in some lessons...everyone in the 'populars' think I'm so shy and so quiet, but I don't think I am' (Year 8).

The power of 'popular girl' discourse was evident, resulting in the four girls putting aside their 'authentic selves' (Pipher 1994, 27) and carefully negotiating when they could speak their minds, and when they were required to bite their tongues (Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007). They also appeared to be trying to avoid drawing attention to themselves (see also Collins 1996; Fisher 2014), and this could also have been consolidated further by their 'non-popular girl' attributes (attributes which were relevant to Lily, Erin and Leah, although not to Molly).

We know that these four girls were facing significant home/personal challenges (see Table 1) and, therefore, again, we need to reflect on the 'interlocking' of discourse, within a 'clustering of power relations' (Foucault 1979, 30). This raises the possibility that the girls' confirmed challenges, anxiety and/or unhappiness outside of school might be intersecting with, and contributing towards their withdrawn and passive behaviour in school. Lily, Erin and Leah were also from low-income families, and there is evidence that girls from this demographic can deny their needs and desires, to protect their parents (Ridge 2005). The girls' passive behaviour could, therefore, be an extension of this.

The data also provides evidence that this passive position was impacting on their learning – for example, Molly discussed how failure to seek help in class, when she did not understand, was impacting on her grades. We have to acknowledge that teachers – faced with the dominant 'uncool to work' discourse – might have encouraged and reinforced this 'contemporary discourse of femininity' (Youdell 2006). Leah, Erin and Lily were also restricted in their ability to compensate for their passive school position through additional learning experiences at home (Stahl 2015), as they already came from low-income families; and all four girls were time-short, either because they were supporting family members and/or because they were distracted by home challenges. Their passivity, therefore, needs to be acknowledged in relation to the powerful intersection of 'popular girl' which encouraged it, and 'challenges at home' which also appeared to reinforce it. Therefore, school provided a '... [missed] opportunity for developing social and academic skills to overcome early disadvantage and deprivation' (Ridge 2005, 28).

The angry girl

Georgia's dyed hair, make-up and short skirt, combined with behaviour which was not compliant to the school rules (i.e. arguing with teachers in lessons; throwing items across the classroom, when the teacher's back was turned; and a record of senior teachers being called to remove Georgia from lessons) provided evidence of an embracing of the 'popular girl' discourse. Georgia's suggestion that a 'popular girl' positioning protected her from bullying, also revealed its power (Foucault 1979, 101) within her life.

Yet in interview, Georgia revealed a broader picture behind this 'popular girl' exterior which centred on her 'challenges at home': a sibling with a disability/health needs. Georgia discussed her explicit anger towards many of her secondary teachers, who did not engage or empathise with the challenges she faced at home:

Hmm, there's a few more [teachers] like, Mrs X, who has left now. She used to be, like, a really horrible person. She like...told my class that we should all be in a special needs school...Yeah, cos, like, my [names her sibling] is...gonna probably die, so when Mrs X said that I was, like, pretty offended...' (Year 8 interview).

'So, like, it's quite hard... I just give up about telling them [the teachers]' (Year 8 interview).

Indeed, Georgia implied that the teachers' lack of empathy contributed to her noncompliant behaviour, for example:

'...if they [the teachers] treat you in a horrible way, they expect you to be nice back to them; but, like, if they're gonna treat us like that, we'll probably do the same, as you saw from the last lesson [where non-compliant behaviour was observed]' (Year 8 interview).

Here, Georgia not only appeared to be recognising the lack of support she received with the powerful 'challenges at home' discourse, but also appeared to be acknowledging the 'lack of connection' (Youdell 2006) between home and school.

It was this lack of connection – and its associated lack of support – which was prompting her anger and also contributing to her non-compliant behaviour. Therefore, whilst the 'challenges at home' were undoubtedly a Foucauldian (1979, 101) 'stumbling-block' for Georgia, I would argue that these 'stumbling-blocks' were compounded by their interlocking with a seemingly unsympathetic school discourse, which she felt did not acknowledge her home difficulties.

Georgia's adoption of the 'popular girl' discourse was, therefore, complex: partly as a reaction to this discourse's power and, therefore, providing protection from bullying; and partly as a reaction to the power of another discourse in her life – 'challenges at home' – and its negative interlocking with school discourse.

Despite this, there was evidence that Georgia did make efforts to part-‘resist’ the power of both the ‘challenges at home’ and ‘popular girl’ in her life, with some success. She created a network of familial-like support around her by gravitating towards what she described as the ‘thoughtful’ teachers, where she could ‘...start to grow with [them], and they start to feel like family to you, like your friends do’ (Year 8 interview). This supported her in dealing with the power of the ‘challenges at home’ discourse. Georgia also appeared to be part-‘resisting’ (Foucault 1979, 101) through ‘compromise’ (Foucault 1979, 96) the ‘uncool to work’ element of the ‘popular girl’ discourse. For example: ‘I’ve, like, started to focus and, like, get my work done, but, like, have a bit of a laugh some time’ and ‘I’ve started to, like, do it [my work] myself at home; like, I will start researching things and everything’ (Year 8 interview), away from the gaze of her ‘popular’ peers. Therefore, we can see Georgia attempting to maintain some control in the face of such a ‘cluster of power relationships’ (Foucault 1979, 30), and implicitly developing her own strategies for confronting this power. This implied some overlap with the ‘self-supporting girl’, who is discussed below.

The self-supporting girl

The final case studies also provide examples of girls developing their own strategies in the face of powerful discourse. As outlined in Table 1, Mia and Amber were experiencing a range of significant home challenges in their lives, some of which have only been discussed broadly, to protect their identities. Like their peers, they were also confronted with the power of the ‘popular girl’ discourse at school. Yet neither discourse featured frequently in their interviews, which was unusual, compared to the broader sample. Mia and Amber appeared to have part-‘resisted’ (Foucault 1979, 101) the ‘popular girl’ discourse through compromise (Foucault 1979, 96), although at a minor level relative to their peers. For example, they did not wear short skirts and make-up, but also avoided a low maintenance appearance (Holland and Harpin 2015). Like the broader sample, Amber had moderately adapted her learner identity – ‘...(I) have a laugh with my friends but while learning’ (Year 9 interview), but her friendships were uncompromised – ‘I’d rather, like, not have loads of friends than having to change my whole personality and everything’ (Year 8 interview) which was an implicit reference to the dominating ‘popular girl’ discourse.

Mia’s social identity also appeared to be uncompromised; and her learner identity remained focused, with limited evidence of Foucauldian (1979, 96) ‘compromise’ in the face of the dominating ‘uncool to work’ discourse. Her behaviour – quiet and conscientious – reflected elements of enduring discourses of femininity (Youdell 2006), but she rejected the passivity associated with it, remaining actively engaged in class. As a girl of Black British or dual (Black British and White British) heritage (her individual heritage is not disclosed here, to protect her identity), Mia did not appear to be explicitly limited by excluded Black femininity discourse, but this could not be confirmed within the limited observations undertaken.

Whilst it was acknowledged that Amber and Mia did not have ‘non-popular girl’ attributes, which particularly encouraged ‘othering’ in their peers, their greater confidence in resisting the ‘popular girl’ discourse was pronounced. When discussing their lives out-of-school, Mia and

Amber only briefly referred to their home challenges which, again, separated them from the other case studies. It was possible that they felt that their home challenges – which teacher and school data revealed as significant – were too personal, and that discussing them would be too intrusive. Therefore, it was important not to equate omission with lack of impact, as I discussed earlier in relation to data analysis.

Another difference in the two girls was their focus on out-of-school activities: Amber had built a busy life out-of-school through voluntary work with younger children, which she had initiated herself. She commented:

‘...I love going and helping; it’s so nice. Yeah, like, I leave here at 5 past, get on the about 12 past [bus], get off at the shops about 20 past and then quickly run to the [name of place] sign in, get changed and go help’ (Year 8).

Mia had joined a club two nights per week, and discussed the skills she had developed as a result:

‘...my attitude to, like, things is, like, improving because I do other things out of school as well as in school now. It’s, like, I can talk more to people. Like, more confidence . . . ‘cause sometimes we do, like, speeches in front of people... and it’s sort of helped in school as well...’ (Year 9).

Acknowledging the power of the ‘popular girl’ and the ‘challenges at home’ discourses in the girls’ lives, one could infer that these activities could have provided a distraction for them; or perhaps a ‘back-up’ life encouraged confidence and, therefore, part-‘resistance’ to the ‘cluster of power relations’ (Foucault 1979, 30) which they encountered. As Paechter and Clark state:

‘...girls can also have a reasonably easy time of it as long as they have other things in their lives apart from the social world of school. In our study this appeared to give them sufficient confidence to ignore, and, indeed, resist, discourses of ‘cool’...’ (2016, 469).

Or perhaps it was the girls’ inbuilt skills/attributes which motivated them to establish a ‘back-up’ life in the first place.

A ‘back-up’ life also provided access to a ‘back-up’ adult, which appeared to further bolster the girls’ confidence. For example, Lucy – who had experienced temporary ‘othering’ due to an identity characteristic – discussed the support she received from her youth leaders:

‘I managed to get help from my youth leaders as well, to give me advice... I managed to get some advice from them which was really helpful and they don’t know the person who was bullying me, so it gave them a perspective. . .’ (Lucy, Year 9).

Whilst relatively few girls from the sub-sample had access to an out-of-school ‘back-up’ person, some girls were able to source help within school: as discussed earlier, Georgia built up relationships with ‘thoughtful teachers’; Sophie received weekly support, following her self-

harming; Molly received support when her parents separated; and Nicole requested support to discuss home challenges:

'So I got to like speak to him [a mentor] about stuff and . . . sometimes he'd like call home and say that he's chatted with me and that . . . it's nice to have someone that's kind of outside, um, and, like, isn't biased in any way' (Nicole, Year 9).

In contrast, other girls within the sub-sample – Leah, Lily and Erin – had been provided with someone to talk to in school, but it did not appear to have had any meaningful impact on the girls' bullying or 'othering'. This raised the question: what made it successful for the girls discussed above? Perhaps the support utilised the in-built resources which these girls brought to the sessions (Colley 2003) – for example, their proactive approach to seeking help through a 'back-up' life and/or person; their (implicit) awareness of the 'cluster of power relations' (Foucault 1979, 30) at play and a desire to find ways of managing them. Perhaps girls such as Lucy and Nicole had access to more experienced and knowledgeable adults to support them; or perhaps the 'non-popular girl' attributes, which were applicable to Leah, Lily and Erin, continued to disempower these girls from seeking change. These issues, well as those emerging from the other three themes, will now be critically engaged with in the final section.

Conclusion

Firstly, it is important to return to the original research questions: *how do girls negotiate the dominating 'popular' discourse, when intersecting with the equally powerful 'challenges at home' discourse; are girls able to resist the power of these discourses, and acquire/retain agency?*

The case studies presented here have demonstrated that negotiation of the two powerful discourses in the girls' lives required resourcefulness and skill, deployed through carefully managed Foucauldian part-'resistance' (1979, 101) which sometimes involved 'compromise' (Foucault 1979, 96). The girls who were successful in their negotiation benefited from long-term 'back-up' – both activities and people – to distract, broaden, bolster and, most importantly, support them in resisting the cluster of power relations (Foucault 1979, 30) in their lives. Yet the study has also identified where there were Foucauldian (1979, 101) discourse 'stumbling-blocks'. These included 'non-popular girl' attributes, which prevented girls from accessing and/or negotiating the 'popular girl' discourse, and appeared to be compounded by their home/personal struggles, resulting in an 'othered' status; girls who were engaged in extreme passivity in an attempt to negotiate the 'popular girl' discourse – a position which also appeared to be reinforced by their personal/home challenges; and one girl, who was angry, explicitly identifying a lack of support in coping with her 'challenges at home', and a lack of connection between home and school resulting in her displaying attributes and behaviour associated with the 'popular girl' discourse – but sometimes by default.

An important question, therefore, is how we can support the girls in navigating their way through these Foucauldian (1979, 101) ‘stumbling-blocks’. I would suggest that this support should be divided into two parts: firstly, supporting the girls’ current position, including what this support would look like; secondly, reflecting on whether it is possible to predict/pre-empt the Foucauldian ‘stumbling-blocks’ (1979, 101) and provide support earlier. These two elements will now be discussed further below.

Supporting the girls’ current position: creating access to ‘back-up’ lives and people; identifying individual ‘stumbling blocks’

The data presented here has identified two possible starting points for support. Firstly, all the girls would benefit from being provided with a wider landscape than their current school environments through out-of-school activities tailored to their particular needs and interests. The majority of girls who were identified as having discourse ‘stumbling-blocks’ (1979, 101) were accessing Free School Meals and, therefore, were provided with Pupil Premium funding (DfE 2014). The aim of this Government funding is ‘...to help disadvantaged pupils of all abilities perform better, and close the gap between them and their peers’ (DfE 2018b). I would argue that by providing the girls with these broader out-of-school opportunities, it will place them in a stronger position to navigate the powerful interlocking discourses and ‘stumbling-blocks’ in their lives. This will not only potentially bolster them when negotiating a physical and social identity at school, but also support them in navigating their learner identities. Schools would need, however, to work closely with families, as some of the girls had caring responsibilities outside of school and, therefore, would require support in negotiating periods of time when they could be free to participate. After all, we know that lower-income girls self-exclude from social activities (Ridge 2005).

Linked to this is the need to provide the girls with a broader range of adults to support them as they negotiate potential ‘stumbling-blocks’ (Foucault 1979, 101) – ‘back-up’ people, when things are challenging at home and at school. This person needs to be consistent – hence a need not to rely on one person – and undertaken by staff who are appropriately skilled. After all, addressing the complex ‘stumbling-blocks’ identified here requires more than the well-meaning welfare support that some of the girls were accessing. Indeed, it requires sophisticated and individualised scrutiny of the intersection of discourses which the girls are experiencing. This builds on the work of Bansel et al. (2009) who discuss how schools need a stronger understanding and awareness of the discourses, positioning and relations of power that are at play in their settings, to inform the support which they provide. Pupil Premium funding could be used to provide girls with specialist intervention, enabling them to identify and navigate discourse domination and negative interlocking, with opportunities to rehearse and act out potential solutions. These solutions would also need to draw on the resources which the girls bring with them (Colley 2003), as well as their tastes and appreciations (Stahl 2015).

Alongside this, we also need to consider looking at some of the specific ‘stumbling-blocks’

– for example the ‘non-popular girl’ attributes – which compounded the challenges the girls were already facing within the home and in their personal lives. Whilst some attributes – e.g. homophobia – had the protection of legislation, which the perpetrators were rightly alerted to, other protection was less clear-cut – e.g. being ridiculed for working hard in class. Many of these ‘othering’ examples went unreported and yet their impact was significant. I would, therefore, argue that these examples should be reflected upon within a broader debate about discourse power in schools.

Taking a proactive approach: predicting and pre-empting the Foucauldian ‘stumbling blocks’

The longitudinal aspect of this study has also identified that many of the girls who presented with Foucauldian (1979, 101) ‘stumbling-blocks’ were viewed as vulnerable at primary-secondary transition, even if the primary teachers were not always able to clarify specifically why (see Fisher 2017). This raises two possibilities: 1. that the girls’ ‘stumbling blocks’ could have been pre-empted; 2. that a focus on individual girls’ ‘stumbling blocks’ might actually be too narrow and restrictive, and that the focus should, instead, be on the general vulnerability which attracted their ‘popular’ peers’ negative gaze in the first place. This recognises that a ‘stumbling block’ has the potential to simply shift from one ‘non-popular’ attribute to another, if the underlying vulnerability is not addressed.

Perhaps the focus should be on recognising this general vulnerability, arguably reinforced by the girls’ home/personal challenges, and intervening to challenge it at a much earlier stage – prior to the girls leaving primary school. The strategies would not be different: the girls would still be encouraged to have access to ‘back-up’ people and activities, but the earlier intervention would enable them to have longer to rehearse and explore issues of power and agency and, in doing so, have the benefit of stability and continuity across the transition.

Therefore, to conclude, in demanding greater support for girls currently facing a Foucauldian (1979, 30) ‘interlocking’ of the ‘popular’ and ‘challenges at home’ discourses at secondary school, as well as supporting those transitioning in the future, intervention would benefit from a strategic, individualised approach, which is proactive, rather than reactive. The successful examples of Foucauldian (1979, 101) part-‘resistance’ and ‘compromise’ (Foucault 1979, 96) identified here provide the starting point and the ambition.

Notes

1. In the English system, children transfer to secondary school aged 11. Secondary school is divided into two Key Stages: Key Stage 3 (11–14 years) and Key Stage 4 (14–16 years). Children have a ‘home’ tutor group, but are usually taught individual subjects by specialists. At the end of Key Stage 4, they sit the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE).
2. Funded by the Society of Educational Studies.
3. ‘Ever 6 FSM’ is defined as having been in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) at any point

in the last six years (DfE 2012), and comes with additional funding per pupil – the Pupil Premium – which was £900 at the time of the data collection (DfE 2014).

4. The term ‘working at’, ‘working below’ or ‘working above’ the expected level is used in schools to identify the progress of individual pupils. At the time of writing, this was matched to the National Curriculum levels (Levels 1-8 and ‘exceptional performance’), with Levels 5-6 representing expectations for most 14 year olds (QCDA, 2010). Therefore, ‘working at’ was used to describe children working within Levels 5-6.

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Name	Ethnicity	'Ever 6 FSM'/ lower income	Above, at or below expected level	Experienced 'othering'	'Non-popular girl' attributes	Home/personal challenges (sometimes discussed broadly, to protect the girls' identities)
<i>Lucy</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	Above	Yes	Identity characteristic	Low-income family; damp/cramped housing; inconsistent relationship with father/emotional neglect from father.
<i>Sophie</i>	White British	Unknown	At	Yes	Identity characteristic	Inconsistent relationship with father/emotional neglect from father; self-harming.
<i>Nicole</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	At	Yes	None identified.	Low-income family; inconsistent relationship with father; vulnerabilities in the home (not disclosed here); strained relationships with adults in the home; ran away from home.
<i>Molly</i>	White British	Unknown	Above	No	None identified.	Anxiety issues; parental separation.
<i>Amy</i>	White British	Unknown	Above	Yes	Two identity characteristics.	Anxiety issues.
<i>Chloe</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	Below	Yes	Identity characteristic.	Low-income family; sibling with disability.
<i>Georgia</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	At	No	None identified.	Low-income family; sibling disability.
<i>Lily</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	Below	Yes	Physical characteristic.	Low-income family; personal /home vulnerabilities (not disclosed here).
<i>Erin</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	Below	Yes	Reticent and quiet.	Low-income family; periods away from mother; friendship issues.
<i>Amber</i>	White British	'Ever 6 FSM'	At	No	None identified.	Low-income family; absent father; sibling with disability; undisclosed vulnerabilities in the home.
<i>Mia</i>	Black British or Dual Heritage (Black British & White)	'Ever 6 FSM'	At	No	None identified	Low-income family; absent father; sibling with disability.

	British) – not individually disclosed here to protect Mia’s identity.					
Leah	White British	‘Ever 6 FSM’	Below	Yes	Physical characteristic.	Low-income family; absent father; social/friendship issues.

Table 1: summary of the sub-sample of 12 case studies